GOD THE MENDER
Genesis 33:1-11
Matthew 5:21-24
September 30, 1973

At least once a week a particular ritual happens as I arrive home in the evening for dinner. One of the children is waiting and as I come through the door I am handed a broken toy, or told a tale of woe about the bike or wagon or airplane that has become a casualty of old age [redacted] or rough handling. Sometimes there are tears - sometimes there is guilt - but always there is hope and total trust, that whatever the problem is Daddy will fix it. Sometimes I can. And when I can I experience a rather rare and special feeling of satisfaction. Petty parental ego, perhaps; more so for me because I am not exactly a master mechanic. And yet one of the great privileges and joys of parenthood is to be a Mender - a fixer - a healer - one who restores that which is broken - who makes whole that which has come apart.

You've done that: our stories would vary only in detail and the relative degree of expertise we bring to the task. I mention it because the God we worship is in the mending - healing - fixing business. Instead of toys he deals in human lives. Instead of bikes and trucks and planes he works with human relationships. When we feel like we are coming apart at the seams he has the power to put us back together again. When, like Humpty Dumpty, our lives are in pieces and all the kings & horses and all the kings men can't help, God can. When we experience fracturing and breaking in our relationships with those we love, God ~~can handle that too~~ is part of that experience; and can be a power for reconciliation.

That's the point of one of the oldest stories in the Bible: the saga of Issac and his sons Jacob and Esau. What we usually remember is that Jacob disguised himself as Esau by putting some ~~lamb's wool~~ sheepskin on his arms and neck and succeeded in beating his brother out of their father's blessing. Or we remember something about Jacob's Ladder, or that he wrestled all night with an angel and came out crippled. All of which is unfortunate because the story is a beautiful one and it concludes in a rather surprising manner. It happens between the 27th and the 34th Chapters of the book of Genesis and it has enough intrigue and human interest to make good reading.

In case you haven't been working with that part of the Bible recently let me review the story quickly.

Issac was old and blind and he sent his eldest and favorite son, Esau, to hunt some game and prepare a meal with the promise that he would bless him when he returned. Jacob, the younger of the two, and his mother Rebekah's favorite, conspired with his mother to receive the highly valued blessing. Together they worked on the disguise and prepared the food and succeeded in deceiving the old man. Issac thought J. was Esau - and blessed him

Now Issac and Esau were a little upset when they discovered what had happened and so his mother arranged for Jacob to escape to her brother ~~Talian~~ Laban. On the way Jacob had his famous dream about the ladder and the angels descending and ascending and God's promise that he would be the father of a great nation. Jacob fell in love with Laban's daughter Rachel and agreed to work for seven years in order to earn the right to be her husband. But after seven years ~~Talian~~ Laban offered another daughter - Leah. So Jacob worked another seven years before Rachel became his wife.

At about that time Jacob, always crafty, did some fancy maneuvering with ~~Talian's~~ Laban's stock and ended up owning more than his father-in-law. With Rachel and Leah, a lot of children, and his new flocks he ~~set off~~ ran again ~~to be reunited with his~~ back to his family. As he neared home he sent messengers ahead to tell Esau he was coming - with great anxiety, we might assume. On the night before his arrival, Jacob slept alone, across the stream called Jabbock. And he had another mysterious experience ... during the night was visited by a man with whom he wrestled. The man blessed Jacob and toldhim his new name would be Israel and Jacob emerged from the experience with a lame hip.

The next morning Esau approached with 400 men in tow. Jacob couldn't have known what to expect. He went out in front of his entourage - and bowed low as he walked to meet his brother. And Esau - Esau came running down off the hill, embraced his brother, kissed him and extended the love and forgiveness that Jacob wanted so badly. The dam of resentment and hatred and jealousy burst and a relationship fractured years before was given a new beginning. ~~Two brothers embraced and wept together~~.

The point of the story is that when Jacob deceived his father, cheated his brother and stole from his father-in-law, he broke his own relationship with God. Jacob was still an elected man, select-ed by God to be the father of his people. But there was some putting together that had to be done first. And Jacob's escapades over the period of more than fourteen years are the context in which God does his work of mending and healing.

GOD THE MENDER

* is not content w/ alienation: the Bible doesn't include Esau's story - but God must have been agitating his conscience also . .

The dream - the experience at the Jabbock - are expressions of God working in his life to heal those precious relationships he had so casually severed. God, the story seems to be saying, [redacted]. For while Jacob humbled himself by bowing before his brother, Esau forgot about the fact that he was about to square an old account and took the initiative by running alone down the hill. [redacted] - God's will - God's love - God's power - may be seen in the story in what I consider one of the most beautiful verses in the Bible. "But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept." And the climax to the whole saga comes several years later: "And Issac breathed his last; and he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of days; ad his sons Esau and Jacob buried him."

One of the underlying principles of Old Testament religion is that when you break with man you break with God. In early Israelite history, God's declared purpose is to create a nation out of some wandering desert tribes: a nation that would be his special people among all the peoples of the earth. Thus, a great deal of attention is paid in the Old Testament to relationships with members of one's family and with one's neighbors. A man's standing with God depends directly on his membership in the family and ocmmunity. If he broke that, he severed his relationship with God.

Sadly, the Old Testament, is the story of the Jews forgetting that time and time again. As the faith of Israel became the religion of Judaism; as the wandering tribes became a nation, human relationships became less important. Proper observance of ritual replaced proper treatment of the neighbor. Obedience to the law supplanted the sense of oneness with the community. A way of relating - in which one's sense of salvation was all wrapped up in relationship with other people became a religion with major emphasis on personal righteousness. The trust shifted from community to individual from integrity and caring and forgiving in relationships - to proper observance of ceremony and strict adhearance to the rules.

In Jesus' day the Pharisees were the epitome of this shift in emphasis. Totally devoted to ritual, purity and legal obedience they excluded - excommunicated the majority of their countrymen from the faith. Instead of the healing force in the common life of the people, religion became the wedge that divided. Jesus enfuriated them by befriending

THOSE THE Pharisees considered outcast. He challenged the basic suppositions of their religion every time he associated with someone they considered unclean - or a sinner.

Jesus was a mender. He - not they - understood the religion of Israel. This is how he put it: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not kill.' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgement..." And then, in case they didn't get the point: "If you are offering your gift at the altar, and then remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift then before the altar and go: first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."

That is to say, Jesus was reaffirming the old understanding that a break with man is a break with God. And in a dramatic image, put a higher priority on getting your relationships right than performing the most sacred act of Judaism - placing a gift om the altar - Jesus saw the destructiveness of unresolved anger and resent, and the hypocricy of affirming love for God while arrogantly shutting out other people.

Frederick Beuchner in Wishful Thinking, has this to say about anger:

> "Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll your tongue over the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back - in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are ~~medfully~~ wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you." (P.2)

Now we've taken the long route through the Biblical text this morning because, I think, it speaks for itself. It becomes the Word of God as you apply it to those particular relationships of yours that need some mending. It becomes the power of God as you sense that He is the one agitating your conscience or provoking your guilt over relationships that are less than satisfactory. And there is no one here, I would suggest, who doesn't have some.

We are more aware today, in a healthy way, of all our relationships. Every book counter is full of titles advising how to raise children, how to get along with teenagers, how to get more out of your marriage. Consider the preponderance of family and marriage situations on television. All the way from Dick Van Dyke to the Archie Bunkers. We are learning

important + deep

that human relationships are fragile ~~and important~~ and demanding. And part of what is happening is that we are becomeing aware that many of our relationships could be a lot better than they are. On his way to reconciliation - J. was crippled: so the first step in improving relationship is the admission that they're not as good as they could be. - painful!

A marriage counselor tells the account of one group meeting in which the participants were to cut pictures out of magazines and put together a collage that described their marriage. One woman "cut out the most gorgeous pictures she could find - lavish holiday dinners with candeles and colorful tables - a young couple, laughing and running barefoot on the beach - a station wagon full of children with baseball gloves and toothy grins - front and center was a bouquet of brilliant red roses. She pasted all these pictures into a solid collage of beauty - a dream world of idyllic relationships. But then came the moment of truth. She took a large black crayon and smeared the whole collection - disillusionment, discouragement - frustrated hopes." culture has defined good marriage - and we spend lots of time conforming to that definition. Takes courage

In terms of family relationships, Margaret Mead has observed that this is prob ably the most miserable, unhappiest generation of parents in human history. Listen to adolescents talk and you'll hear about unsatisfactory relationships with parents. Listen to parents and it's the same story in a different vocabulary. [and general relationships - friendship - we're so busy - so obsessed w/ fighting the battle of life that a major problem is lonliness

→ The God of Jacob was a power for reconciliation and forgiveness between brothers. Jesus was a mender of basic human relationships. We can, I think, learn from him.

He affirmed people, especially the broken. His criticism was reserved usually for the arrogant. self righteous He took time for people: he touched them physically, he listened to them, he identified with them, he loved them. He told them that they mattered: that they were important to him and to God. And the result was that they began to appreciate themselves: if they were loveable to him - they must be alright. And suddenly they were able to became new people - love others in a new and honest way. i.e. He taught that good relationships begin with ourself - with self esteem: self appreciation: and he based it on God's love.

→ But the most important thing he taught, and in retrospect, the most important lesson to be learned from the saga of Jacob and Esau, is that the key to healing a broken relationship is always held by the person who has been offended. Remorse, regret, apology - will not get the job done. It is possible to insult someone, feel badly about it later, go to that person and apologize and ~~nothing changes~~ change nothing. The relationship is still broken.

If someone hurts you and you draw back, shutting them out until they apologize - forgiveness

AWT May 87 no comment

isn't really going to happen when they get around to saying "I'm sorry". I've done it myself, but there is probably nothing more meaningless than addressing a child: "Now you tell your brother you're sorry." It makes us feel better because a ritual has been performed, but nothing resembling reconciliation has transpiried between siblings.

In marriage, in families, in other relationship, we go at it backwards. Forgiveness can only be given by the one who has been hurt. Only Esau could cause a reconciliation by running down the hill to embrace his brother. And only your love -your grace - your forgiveness can really mend the relationship broken by someone else. Try it. Pick someone who has offended you. Go to that person, and in whatever words you have, tell them you've forgiven them: that you want the relationship to be whole again.

Forgiveness is not a matter of forgetting the wrong that was done and acting as if it never happened. too easy - too superficial. Forgiveness never ignores the pain . . Forgiveness means that the hurtful act will not be a barrier "This shall not separate us. The bond of love is stronger than the separating power the would come between us." Only the offended person can say that.

It can be risky business, of course. It opens you to exploitation. There may be people who don't want your forgiveness. Jesus got crucified for his efforts. But love has a winsomeness aobut it that can overcome a lot of barriers.

That's what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about: forgiveness that is extended before we ask: love that takes the initiative and comes to us: a God whose consistant graciousness accepts us as we are. God is a mender - a healer - a fixer of brokeness - in our lives - and in our relationships AMEN

Father, grant us the grace to be forgiving, even as you have forgiven us. And help us to be menders in your work of reconciliation. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

To live as one of His people - is to share this work - to be a mender of relationships beginning with my own. It is to sense that God uses us in his work of healing.

It's a good + beautiful thing to restore that which has been broken. To make whole that which is coming apart.

Amen